

## **When the Mountains Roared: A Look Back at the 1910 Fire**

Exhibit Opens March 28, 2010 Fort Missoula, Missoula, Montana

2010 marks the 100th anniversary of one of the largest fires in American history. Known as the Big Burn, the Big Blowup, the Great Idaho Fire or simply the 1910 Fire, it was big, not only for the acres burned or its speed of travel or the people killed, but because of its impact on the American way of thinking about fire and the forest resource for almost the next 100 years. This was particularly true of the men who fought the fires for the fledgling US Forest Service, newly created just five years before in 1905. These men stayed with the Forest Service and pursued its new goal of suppressing all fires - never to let the disaster happen again. And in this they were supported by a willing public and to a large extent, a willing Congress.

This exhibit can only touch on the extensive history of the entire 1910 Fire and will concentrate on the two eventful days of August 20-21, when the mountains literally "roared" as the flames of the fire were fanned by hurricane-force winds. It will not delve into the political consequences and controversies surrounding fire control. Others, such as former Lolo National Forest Superintendent, Elers Koch, writer Elizabeth Goodwin Spencer and most recently fire specialist Stephen Pyne, have written comprehensive accounts of 1910 as well as exploring the political ramifications. These works will be referenced as additional sources.

The exhibit, by laying out the conditions existing in 1910 along with the constraints that existed, seeks primarily to give the public an understanding of how the fire happened and how individuals and communities dealt with the overwhelming size of the fire, its speed and its vehemence. It depicts the terror it brought and the exhaustion of endless days of fire fighting which culminated in a holocaust that some 86 (now thought to be at least 91) did not live through, while hundreds of others carried the scars, the burned hands and faces, poor breathing and limited eye sight for the rest of their lives.

A special portion of the exhibit will focus on the city of Missoula, which although not burned by the fire, played its own unique role in the fire story. Missoula County at that time extended to the Idaho border and did include much burned land. In presenting the fire account, the exhibit draws heavily on the stories of the individuals whose lives were affected by the fire, and the official reports that explained what happened.

Finally, the exhibit will enumerate the changes that occurred within a year of two of the fire and then tie the 1910 fire to the present by touching, only briefly, on the changes in methods and policies of fighting fires since the 1910 fire, including the impact of the 1988 Yellowstone fires. Differing views of fire such as those of Native Americans which existed long before 1910 and are recognized today but were not part of the 1910 fire story will be identified.

The exhibit concludes with a reminder that even though forest fire fighting techniques are better today - communication is not dependent on phone lines strung randomly across trees, and the ability to get into the wilder areas of the forest is enhanced by helicopters, airplanes and smokejumpers - the weather conditions that produced the Big Blowup of 1910 could happen again and this time a fire would be within forests that bear the effects of almost 100 years of fire suppression and include many homes built in the urban-wildland interface.

The exhibit will open Sunday, March 28, 2010.

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